

Dark Places, Wicked Companions & Strange Experiences

A Companion Essay to the Exhibit

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A FEW OBSERVATIONS ON THIS EXHIBITION

INTRODUCTION

This is an exhibition of Sherlockian art and springs from the Sherlock Holmes Collections' mission to document, study, and share the world's most famous consulting detective in and through popular culture. Most of the pieces on display come from John Bennett Shaw's extraordinary assemblage of Sherlockiana amassed over decades of dedicated, enthusiastic, and networked collecting. In 1965, Shaw (1913-1994) was invested in the Baker Street Irregulars as "The Hans Sloane of My Age." He was given the Two Shilling Award by the BSI "for extraordinary devotion to the cause beyond the call of duty" in 1980.

In his retirement, Shaw moved to Santa Fe, New Mexico, where he (along with his wife, Dorothy) continued to build what became the largest private collection of Sherlockiana in the world (and where he continued to share his knowledge and collections with the many pilgrims who visited Santa Fe or contacted him by mail or telephone). He was well-known across the United States and abroad for his lectures on Sherlock Holmes, and his classic work, "The Basic Holmesian Library," (colloquially known as "The Shaw 100") remains a valued bibliography among collectors. In the mid-1980s Shaw arranged for the transfer of his collection to the University of Minnesota, a process that was completed a decade later.

Other items on display—notably original artwork by Frederic Dorr Steele and Sidney Paget, along with original manuscripts by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle—come from the Philip S. and Mary Kahler Hench Collection. Dr. Hench (1896-1965), a Nobel Laureate (1950) and physician at the Mayo Clinic and his wife, Mary (1905-1982), built one of the more remarkable Sherlockian libraries ever assembled. Their investigations in Switzerland around the village of Meiringen, the Reichenbach Falls, and subsequent report to the local Sherlockian group, The Norwegian Explorers of Minnesota, led members to join with the Sherlock Holmes Society of London in commissioning and installing a commemorative plaque near the falls marking the immortal struggle between Sherlock Holmes and Professor Moriarty. Their collection was given to the University in 1978.

DARK PLACES

Some exhibits are easier than others to contemplate, organize, mount, and describe. This was not such a one. It was a beast, a hole, a sinister and seemingly empty space filled with dread. For many months I wondered about this nameless thing that threatened my creativity and held me captive. Silently we circled each other in the autumnal and winter darkness. In some sense my captivity was rooted in the theme chosen for the triennial Sherlock Holmes conference co-sponsored by the University of Minnesota Libraries,

Friends of the Sherlock Holmes Collections, and the Norwegian Explorers of Minnesota. This theme is reflected in the title of the exhibit. I did not know what to do with dark places, wicked companions, or strange experiences. This tripartite topic for a triennial conference tripped me up. I had difficulty recalling the entire sequence, mixed up strange with wicked, or replaced dark with dangerous. I could not make heads or tails of what this thing and its attendant exhibit should be called. Finally, in desperation, I concocted a mnemonic device to remember the correct word order. **D**ark **p**laces, **w**icked **c**ompanions, and **s**trange **e**xperiences (DPWCSE) became **d**isplaced **p**ersons sitting in a **w**ater **c**loset reading a **s**tandard **e**dition. My device worked. I haven't forgotten the title of the conference or exhibit since drawing this little picture in my mind palace.

And yet, I continued to wrestle with the theme. Months before, as part of preparing our yearly publicity for the Libraries' exhibition program, I provided a short blurb describing this exhibit. Still clueless as to what this show might entail, I pulled a sentence out of thin air: "This exhibit echoes the conference theme and will explore those places, companions, and experiences that continue to draw readers and fans to the ever expanding universe of Mr. Holmes and Dr. Watson." Meanwhile, my mind wandered through the vault, looking for content that might fit the bill. I concentrated on places in the Holmes adventures that unsettled readers, those worst or most dangerous men of London Holmes sometimes mentioned in the tales, or inexplicable experiences—especially those brushed off by Holmes as nonsensical—that might give the exhibit a tint of the bizarre.

Bits and phrases floated in my mind. "This agency stands flat footed upon the ground and there it must remain. The world is big enough for us. No ghosts need apply." So Holmes said in the "Sussex Vampire." Or this well-known exchange in "Silver Blaze."

"Is there any point to which you would wish to draw my attention?"

"To the curious incident of the dog in the night-time."

"The dog did nothing in the night-time."

"That was the curious incident," remarked Sherlock Holmes.

Or, best of all, the Hound, the Moor, and the power of darkness.

"To that Providence, my songs, I hereby commend you, and I counsel you by way of caution to forbear from crossing the moor in those dark hours when the powers of evil are exalted."

Now we were getting somewhere. The moor, principal setting in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, was the perfect dark place in which to situate our exhibit. In planning, I always sit down with our extraordinarily talented designer and artist, Darren Terpstra, and describe the look and feel I wish to convey. For this show I wanted the gallery as dark as possible, with the curved wall of windows screened or covered. I shared photographs of the moor with Darren and together we settled on an image to use as a backdrop across the long limestone wall. We agreed on minimal lighting for the cases. Nothing else in the gallery would be illuminated. No additional signage, save case caption cards, would be

used. Darren would mask some of the windows with black fabric. Rock outcroppings would divide the space into three parts. Moss and grass would be added for atmosphere. I would create a windy soundtrack. Our design pieces began to fall into place.

While repairing an external line, my local telephone company cut a number of small trees on my property. I suggested we use these as part of the exhibit. Darren had a better idea. A number of branches from a tree on the bluff below Andersen Library cracked and fell during an earlier windstorm. Now gnarled and dried, these proved ideal for our desolate moor. On a sunny afternoon, saw in hand, Darren and I surreptitiously cut three branches from this windswept tree and hauled them into the library's garage. Later, Darren worked his magic and mounted these in the gallery. Our dark place began to take shape.

WICKED COMPANIONS

And then there were the companions. Wicked men (and, perhaps, a few women) abound in the Sherlockian canon of fifty-six short stories and four longer novellas. At the top of the list, "the Napoleon of crime," was Professor James Moriarty. I knew from long experience that we had plenty of representations of him in the collections. But what of the others? Could I find interesting or evocative images in the collections to represent them? Who should I include (or exclude) at my peril?

There was Colonel Sebastian Moran, chief of staff to Professor Moriarty, described by Holmes as "the second most dangerous man in London." Or, Charles Augustus Milverton, designated as "The Napoleon of Blackmail." We might also add John Clay, "the murderer, thief, smasher, and forger" whom Holmes observed "is at the head of his profession, and I would rather have my bracelets on him than on any criminal in London." It is not difficult to assemble a list of nefarious attendants. A quick sample might include:

- Baron Adelbert Gruner (*Illustrious Client*), "a real aristocrat of crime with a superficial suggestion of afternoon tea and all the cruelty of the grave behind it."
- Count Negretto Sylvius (*Mazarin Stone*), "he's a shark. He bites."
- Jonathan Small (*Sign of Four*), "a poorly-educated man, small, active, with his right leg off, and wearing a wooden stump which is worn away upon the inner side."
- Jack Stapleton (*Hound of the Baskervilles*), "a creature of infinite patience and craft, with a smiling face and a murderous heart."
- Henry "Holy" Peters (*Lady Frances Carfax*), "one of the most unscrupulous rascals that Australia has ever evolved—and for a young county it has turned out some very finished types."
- John Woodley (*Solitary Cyclist*), "the reputation of being a most dangerous ruffian."
- Don Murillo (*Wisteria Lodge*), "the most lewd and bloodthirsty tyrant that had ever governed any country with a pretense to civilization."
- Dr. Grimsby Roylott (*Speckled Band*), "a dangerous man to fall foul of!"

- Culverton Smith (*Dying Detective*), “a malicious and abominable smile.”
- Colonel Lysander Stark (*Engineer’s Thumb*), “I do not think that I have ever seen so thin a man. His whole face sharpened away into nose and chin, and the skin of his cheeks was drawn quite tense over his outstanding bones.”
- Professor Coram (*Golden Pince-Nez*), “a weird figure as he turned his white mane and glowing eyes towards us. The eternal cigarette smouldered in his mouth.”
- Jephro Rucastle (*Copper Beeches*), “a clever and dangerous man.”
- Jonas Oldacre (*Norwood Builder*), his was “an odious face—crafty, vicious malignant, with shifty, light-grey eyes and white eyelashes.”
- James Windibank (*Case of Identity*), “a sturdy, middle-sized fellow, some thirty years of age, clean-shaven, and sallow-skinned, with a bland, insinuating manner, and a pair of wonderfully sharp and penetrating grey eyes.”
- George Burnwell (*Beryl Coronet*), “one of the most dangerous men in England—a ruined gambler, an absolutely desperate villain, a man without heart or conscience.”
- Abe Slaney (*Dancing Men*), “the most dangerous crook in Chicago.”
- Peter Carey (*Black Peter*), “the name was given him...for the humours which were the terror of all around him.”

By one count, there are at least sixty-six villains in the Sherlockian adventures. But by now, you get the idea. At least a few of them turn up in the artwork found in the exhibit.

STRANGE EXPERIENCES

If you have wicked companions, then it would seem logically to follow that strange experiences will accompany them. A question then arose: Should I spend part of the exhibit illustrating these occurrences, or will they manifest themselves as a matter of course? I decided to put the question aside, or at least see how things developed. Darren and I created the appropriate environment, with enough nasty fellows to populate it. I was more than certain mysterious events might accompany us.

Items chosen for a visiting researcher from Germany provided inspiration for the core of the exhibition. Among the many boxes, books, and other things retrieved over the course of a four month stay was a notebook full of linoleum block prints created by Betty (b. 1926) and George E. Wells III (1922-1985) in Baltimore over the years 1965-1978. Dr. Wells was a member of The Six Napoleons of Baltimore and invested in the Baker Street Irregulars in 1958 as “The Paradol Chamber.” A graduate from Johns Hopkins, Dr. Wells practiced obstetrics/gynecology in Baltimore. Betty, a graduate of the Maryland Institute College of Art, was an illustrator for NBC television news following an earlier illustrating career for local and national publications.

In “The Five Orange Pips,” Dr. Watson notes that in 1887 the Paradol Chamber was one of “a long series of cases of greater or less interest, of which I retain the records.” One can

only hope that these records surface one day, a new and unreported case that might bring joy to many a Sherlockian.

While many of the prints were mounted, a number of them were not; I decided to use the loose Wells illustrations as the show's "spine," with a block print in each case. They certainly illustrated bizarre moments. Items from other notebooks and boxes filled in the theme.

Some of the notebooks and albums proved problematic. They are "sticky" in the sense that it is difficult to remove items from a page. What were once advertised as "magic" or "magnetic" albums and proved a great hit for scrap-bookers in the 1970s and 1980s are now the bane of paper and photographic conservators. I decided to exhibit a few of these albums "as is" to give viewers a sense of the problem. Once the exhibit is over, we intend to deliver these to our preservation staff for treatment. We'll digitally document the original construction of each album, but for long-term care it is important that we remove art and photographs from this ultimately harmful environment.

One of the techniques or tricks we use when mounting items in a case, especially flat items such as prints, maps, or drawings, is to float the item on a supporting platform. Many of these platforms are hidden from view, giving the item an added sense of dimension. In this instance, I decided to use some of our duplicate books as floating mounts, not always intent on hiding them from view. It is our hope to put many of these duplicate items back into circulation by offering them for sale at some time in the near future to interested readers and collectors. I'm particularly fond of a match made between one displayed work and its mount: the computer printout of Mr. Holmes floats on a book about BASIC programming language.

As you might notice by this point, we had fun designing and assembling this exhibit, even with those initial struggles concerning look and content. There was a final touch I wanted to add that afforded one more opportunity to display something not seen before in our shows: footprints. Taking a cue from the large print of "The Hound" seen on the easel, and its famous quotation—"They were the footprints of a gigantic hound!—we added three other footprints to our moor. They are the footprints of titanic Sherlockians: John Bennett Shaw, Michael Harrison (1907-1991), and E. W. McDiarmid (1909-2000). The casts were made at an earlier conference hosted by the University of Minnesota and the Norwegian Explorers. Michael Harrison was the pen name of English detective fiction and fantasy author Maurice Desmond Rohan. McDiarmid was a founding member of the Norwegian Explorers and its longtime leader, "Sigerson." Shaw...was Shaw.

These three Sherlockians, and so many others, make up our ever expanding Holmesian universe. We celebrate Holmes and Watson through art, storytelling, photography, music, animation, film, and more. Holmes plays well in any medium. But since this exhibit has, ostensibly, three components—places, companions, and experiences—let me leave you with another tripartite thought.

Recently, while watching (again) the BBC production of "Sherlock," comments by the

series' creators, Mark Gatiss and Steven Moffat, caught my ear. Season Two features tales inspired by three iconic Holmes adventures. In the original they are "A Scandal in Bohemia," "The Hound of the Baskervilles," and "The Final Problem." Moffat and Gatiss (or "Mofftiss" in fandom's vernacular) turned these into "A Scandal in Belgravia," "The Hounds of Baskerville," and "The Reichenbach Fall." But they did more than that, as my DVD-linked commentary enlightened me.

Gatiss notes that "for this series of three [it would be] Sherlock and love, Sherlock and fear, Sherlock and death. And this was an area we wanted to play with, that the arch-rationalist is going to be confronted by what appears to be impossible, so what does he do about it?" In a BBC interview, Moffat makes a similar point about Season Two.

Well this year, knowing we were a huge hit, I suppose we felt let's do the three big things: The Woman, the Hound and the Fall.... That also means we see three different sides to Sherlock. We have Sherlock and love, Sherlock and fear and Sherlock and death. He definitely goes through the mill in this new series.

We hope you don't feel like you're going through the mill as you view the exhibit.

Perhaps what we've done here—besides showing seldom-seen Sherlockian art—is to engage in a similarly transformative act, if in a minor key or dimmer shade, of what Moffat and Gatiss did with "Sherlock." Dark places—is it a meditation on death? Wicked companions—a contemplation of fear? And, finally, strange experiences—our long and lost musings on love? Three strands of life, competing for our attention. Is that what we hear on the wind, in the end, as we cross the moor?

"To that Providence, my songs, I hereby commend you...."

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My thanks to Julie McKuras for additional information about George and Betty Wells.



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